

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 152

RC 021 251

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 TITLE Rural Education Reform: The Consultation Process.
 PUB DATE 1997-09-00
 NOTE 24p.; In: The Many Faces of Rural Education. Proceedings of
 the Annual NREA Convention (89th, Tucson, AZ, September
 24-27, 1997); see RC 021 239.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Advocacy; *Community Attitudes; Community Schools;
 Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign
 Countries; Hearings; *Institutional Survival; *Position
 Papers; School Closing; *School Community Relationship;
 *Small Schools; Student Transportation
 IDENTIFIERS Home School Proximity; *Newfoundland

ABSTRACT

On September 10, 1996, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador (Canada) announced that public consultation on education reform would begin on September 16. Just prior to the first hearing, the government circulated a document entitled "Structuring the Education System: A Public Consultation Paper for Educational Change in Newfoundland and Labrador." This paper put forth the government's view that educational reform requires the closure and consolidation of community schools; that small schools are educationally deficient and a drain on the province's resources; that students must be bused to larger schools to take advantage of "better educational opportunities"; and that parents should accept these changes in the best interests of their children. It was clear from the first public meeting that rural communities across the province would not accept the government's reform agenda. Participants at the hearings were generally critical of the government's agenda and articulated the strongly felt view that closing small schools, increasing student busing, and rescinding the long-standing special allocation for small schools could not be characterized as improvements. Many were convinced that the government was primarily interested in saving money or forcing migration to larger "growth centres" by reducing services in rural areas. Public testimony centered on the great value of schools to rural communities, high levels of family and community involvement, intrinsic value of small-scale schooling, use of distance education and information technology to compensate for alleged deficiencies, negative impacts of long bus rides on students and their families, and issues related to schools designated as denominational schools. (SV)

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Rural Education Reform: The Consultation Process

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Prepared for the National Rural Education Association 89th Annual Convention
& Research Forum Tucson, Arizona . September 23-27, 1997

Rural Education Reform: The Consultation Process

By Dennis M. Mulcahy

Introduction

On September 10, 1996 the government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced that the promisedⁱ public consultation on educational reform would begin on September 16. Just prior to the first scheduled meeting, which was to be held in Port Aux Basques, the government circulated a document entitled *Structuring the Education System: A Public Consultation Paper for Educational Change in Newfoundland and Labrador*.ⁱⁱ On the first page of this document, the Minister of Education, the Hon. Roger Grimes, stated the purpose of the consultation process:

The education of our children is something we value greatly. That's why the Government is asking for your advice before making decisions that affect you, your children and your school community. The purpose of this consultation process is to determine how we can best work together to organize our schools and our student transportation system for the future.

Following this statement the *Consultation Paper* then proceeded to outline the "structural" changes the government felt were needed to improve the education system. Of primary concern for rural citizens was the government's long standing view that small community schools should be closed and the children bussed to larger consolidated schools. In effect the government viewed the consultation process as an opportunity for the people of the province to express their views as to which schools on what basis would be closed. There seemed to be the assumption, on government's part, that everyone accepted the logic and necessity of closing a certain number of small schools as part of educational reform. As I shall attempt to illustrate in this paper this was not exactly how rural communities viewed this consultative opportunity. The government also used this document to present selected data regarding declining enrolments and what it referred to as the "economic realities of the nineties." Parents were invited to review this information as it "sets an appropriate context," in the government's view, "for this [consultation] process and provides the key indicators that we need to discuss structural matters."ⁱⁱⁱ

In the first part of this paper, entitled *The Official View*, I will review, briefly, the government's position regarding its proposed "structural reforms" as stated in the *Consultation Paper*. I will describe the changes the government believes must be made so that the students in the province will be ready to compete on the "world stage" with the best students from other provinces and countries.^{iv} I will examine the rationale used to justify and support these changes. In the second part of the paper, *The Grass Roots Perspective*, I will provide an overview of what occurred during the series of 19 public meetings that were held in various parts of the province. Approximately 5,000 people attended these meetings and 250 presentations were made to the minister. In addition many informal questions were asked and comments made during the sessions, some of which lasted as

long as 5 hours.^v I will attempt to summarize some of the views expressed and the questions raised by rural parents and educators participating in these public meetings.

The Official View

School Closure and Consolidation.

From the very beginning of the current round of educational reform^{vi} one of the primary objectives of the provincial government has been the closure and consolidation of small community schools. Such action has been advocated, as a structural change needed to make the system of education more effective and more efficient. *Our Children Our Future*^{vii} introduced the term "school viability" into reform discussions and recommended that "non-viable" small schools be "targeted" for closure.^{viii} To a large extent the *Consultation Paper* being discussed here simply reiterated the government's fundamental position since 1992. In the name of educational reform, non-viable schools should be closed and consolidated. This restructuring will improve the educational opportunities for the children of the province, and allow the government to make the best use of dwindling economic resources. The only outstanding issue as far as the government was concerned was settling on the criteria for determining viability.

A previous attempt by the government to define viability criteria had failed badly. The "School Viability Regulations" publicized in December of 1995^{ix} had defined viability simply in terms of class size. For example, at the k-6 level, a minimum enrolment of 20 students was required for a school to be considered viable. This meant that a k-6 school with less than 140 students was considered non-viable and could be, in the Royal Commission's words "targeted for closure." These regulations placed in immediate jeopardy as many as 180 rural community schools. The public out cry and protest over this simplistic, quantitative approach to determining viability forced the government to withdraw these regulations.^x

The tact taken by the government in the *Consultation Paper*, in terms of defining school viability, was at once more vague and general yet in some ways a more powerful argument, and one definitely more difficult to criticize directly. This time around the government did not fall into the trap of putting a specific enrolment figure as a minimum size for a viable school.

The government's position, simply stated, was that in order to be considered viable a school has to be capable of providing a quality program:

Regardless of where they live or where their children attend school, parents in the Province should be confident that the school is able to offer a quality program.^{xi}

This position of course begs several questions: what constitutes a quality program? From what or more importantly whose perspective will quality be defined or determined? The government's position paper leaves these questions unanswered. There is no indication what it has in mind in regards to a "quality program." There is a suggestion, however,

that a quality program means more than being able to provide core or minimum requirements. Furthermore, the government asserted, it is difficult for small schools to provide the kind of quality programming that is needed or desirable:

In many cases, small schools can offer only the core program, while other larger schools are able to offer a broader, more varied program of studies to the students.

No indication is given by the document as to what size of school is to be considered as a "small school." Declining enrolments over the last few years, however, have created a situation where:

...schools that were once viable are left with so few students that it is unreasonable to operate them. This means that the human and physical resources necessary to offer our students the best possible education are being spread out over more schools than can be sustained. For example, additional building maintenance costs take away from money that could be channeled to educate students in the classroom. We have to do something about this. The issue is a financial one yes, but more importantly it is an issue of educational quality.^{xii}

From the government's point of view the "something" that must be done is very clear. Given the "economic realities of the nineties" and the fact that we have to prepare our children to "take their place on the world stage:"

Government believes it is inappropriate to provide additional resources [to maintain a small school in a community] when *a better learning opportunity* for students is available nearby (emphasis added).^{xiii}

In communities or areas^{xiv} with more than one school, "we have to examine busing options to bring students in small schools to larger ones which will offer them *greater opportunities* (emphasis added)." In the final analysis, parents will have to make a choice. Insist on maintaining their small community school with its limited program options or agree to close their community school and bus their children to "*a larger school that is able to offer a wider range of program options which would provide better opportunities for students* (emphasis added)."^{xv}

The government is sure that parents will make this decision in a "responsible manner" and do what is right for their children. Given the way the government presented the argument what choice did they have? To insist on keeping their community schools is made out to be both immoral and selfish.

Isolated Schools

The *Consultation Paper* acknowledged that no matter how many small schools communities agree to close there will continue to exist certain isolated schools that will

have to be maintained because it would not be possible or feasible to close them. Such schools may be located on offshore coastal islands or be too distant for bussing to another community. These schools - and only these schools - will be provided with additional resources so that they can provide at least a "core program."^{xvi}

A significant change is being proposed here. Previous government policy provided for additional resources, human and material, to be allocated to all small schools. The new policy being proposed would see only those schools that could claim isolation status qualifying for supplemental provision. Location and degree of isolation will now determine allocation, not size. New policy guidelines will see all schools regardless of their size receiving the same allocation based on a per pupil basis. To gain any extra provision a school will have to prove its status as a necessarily existent school.

The policy increases the pressure on a community to agree to close its small school if it cannot prove its isolation status. If, in the government's or school board's view the bus ride to another community and a larger school is a "reasonable distance" the school will be targeted for closure. If the parents do not agree to close the school, then the government will not provide that school with any extra funding regardless of how small it is.

Student Transportation

In order to "rationalize the system" the *Consultation Paper* proposed a number of changes to the student transportation system. School closures and consolidations will necessitate two changes: 1. Students who currently attend a community school will have to be bussed to another community; 2 an increase in time and distance for some students who are already being bussed. Parents, the *Consultation Paper* should accept having their children spending a "reasonable time" on the bus since this will enable them to avail of increased educational opportunities. A "reasonable time" is not defined but the alternatives are made clear to parents: accept the need for an increase in bussing or condemn your children to an inferior form of education.

In addition to wanting to increase and extend bussing as an necessary consequence of closing and consolidating schools, the government also proposed a number of other changes in the name of economy:

- Enforcing strictly the current regulation of the bus only making four stops within the 1.6 km.
- Adopting a system of staggered opening and closing of schools, where practical, in areas where several schools exist. That is, schedule the times schools open and close to permit the same bus to make double runs. This may require some schools to open earlier or close later. For example, one school might open at 8:45 and another at 9:15. This would reduce the number of buses required to transport students.

- Bussing would be provided only to the closest school. (At the time of the consultation process, bussing was provided to the closest denominational school of the parent's choosing).

In addition to these proposed changes the *Consultation Paper* asked people to consider the following:

- whether it is reasonable to increase the distance for school bus eligibility beyond 1.6 kilometres;
- whether the distance for school bus eligibility should be increased for high school students in favour of keeping the distance at 1.6 kilometres for primary and elementary students;
- whether it is reasonable for the taxpayers of the Province to continue to pay the full cost of school busing or whether users of the system should pay some portion of the total cost;
- what should be considered a reasonable busing time (with declining enrolments and the larger geographical areas to be covered, busing times may increase and some students may have to be on a school bus for over 60 minutes); and
- whether parents would choose a longer period of time on the school bus for students to attend a larger, well resourced school or a shorter bus ride for students to attend a smaller school with fewer teachers and resources.

School Designation^{xvii}

Newfoundland and Labrador has a rather unique educational system in North America. The system is a publicly funded totally denominational school system. There are no public non-denominational schools in the province. All schools in the province are officially designated as either Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal, or Integrated (a combination of Salvation Army, United Church, Anglican, and Presbyterian). Although it rarely happens, students can be denied access to a school because they do not adhere to the particular designated Christian denomination of that school. Students are in fact entitled to bussing to the nearest denominational school of their part faith.

As part of its restructuring plans, the government proposed that all schools in the province would be re-designated, in the first instance, as inter-denominational. All children, regardless of their denominational affiliation would be entitled and in fact forced to attend the school closest to where they live. This proposal would in fact eliminate the need for bussing for some children. It would also end the duplication of schooling in a number of communities. Historically, each denomination had a right to establish a school if a sufficient number of adherents lived in a particular community.

However, there would also be a provision for the creation of uni-denominational schools. A uni-denominational school would be a school that had a specific denominational designation. (Such schools would in fact be the same as they were before the proposed changes). The issue for discussion was how to decide which schools would be designated uni-denominational. What criteria and mechanism would be used to make this decision?

The public consultation process was the opportunity for people to give their views as to how uni-denominational schools would be created (or more accurately, re-created). The government offered their view as follows:

Parents of children who will attend school in the 1997/98 school year and who wish to have their children attend uni-denominational schools will be given the opportunity to advise the School Board of that preference. If the parents of a sufficient number of students indicate that they wish their children to attend a uni-denominational school, the School Board will be required to establish such a school, provided the following conditions are met:

- the uni-denominational school meets the criteria for a viable school, and
- the creation of the uni-denominational school does not cause another school to become non-viable.

To summarize briefly the "official view:" The government came to the consultation process with a simple agenda. Education reform dictates the closure and consolidation of small community schools. Small schools are educationally deficient and a drain on the general resources of the province and the education budget in particular. Students will have to bussed to larger schools in other communities where they will be able to avail of "better educational opportunities." Parents should accept these changes because they are in the best interests of their children.

The Grass Roots View^{xviii}

It was clear from the very first public meeting held in Port Aux Basques that rural communities across the province were not going to buy into the government's reform agenda. The public consultation process was going to be their opportunity to continue the fight to save their community schools. Although the government had attempted with its consultation paper to set the agenda and define the parameters for discussion, rural citizens came to this first and all subsequent meetings with their own agendas. They asked questions and raised issues that were important and significant to them, their children and their communities.

As far as rural citizens were concerned this was simply one more battle in the ongoing struggle to save their schools and possibly their very communities and way of life. The successful protest effort earlier in the year (January and February 1996) had been a valuable rehearsal for this public consultation process. Consequently, they were more

prepared and ready to express their views that they might otherwise have been given the shortness of the notice given for the meetings.^{xix}

Participants were generally critical of the government's reform agenda and their actions thus far. There was a strongly felt and articulated view that closing small schools, increasing student bussing, and rescinding long-standing policies that provided special allocation for small schools could not in any way be characterized as improvements. Many were convinced that what the government was primarily interested in was saving money and cutting costs. Improving the quality of education was decidedly secondary. Many people at the public meetings reminded the Minister that the government had already reneged on a commitment to keep any money saved through restructuring in education.

Fighting to save their small schools was nothing new to the people of rural Newfoundland and Labrador. The history of rural education tells many stories of emotionally charged meetings where people expressed their feelings about losing their school. However, one very noticeable difference this time around was that feeling and emotion was supplemented with research data, critical questions and well-argued and articulated positions. The rural schools the government was attempting to close had produced a generation of parents very different from the previous one. There may have been less shouting and tears but there was a lot more facts, figures and informed opinion.^{xx} They felt strongly about the issues as they have always had, but this time around their feelings were informed by research.

School Closure and Consolidation

Community Schools

Preserving their community schools was the most important and central issue for rural participants in the public consultation process. The government entered the process with the assumption that the way to improve rural education and cut costs was to close and consolidate small schools. Rural parents and educators came to the process to convince the government that small schools were not only viable but also valuable and that the foundation of reform should be the preservation and enhancement of community based education and schooling.

When it came to school closure and consolidation issues the official approach had always been to focus exclusively and narrowly on school viability. The decision to close or keep open a school was always made with reference only to the school. No other issues were judged to be either legitimate or relevant. The *Consultation Paper* followed the same line of argument. Rural communities, however, have always insisted that a more comprehensive, a more ecological perspective is required. Closing a school has far-reaching social and economic implications, not just educational ones.

The people of rural Newfoundland and Labrador did not come to the consultation meetings to do as the Minister asked them: agree with him to close their small

community schools so that their children could have a "better educational opportunity" a "reasonable distance" down the road in another community. They came to convince him that he was wrong. They attempted to do this by arguing the importance of the school to the community and the community to the school. The relationship is reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial. Therefore decisions about closing a school cannot be made with reference only to the school or schooling issues. The impact of the closure on the community must be considered and the costs to be paid by the children and their parents who would have to travel by bus out of their home community.

Many rural citizens tried once again to convince the Minister of Education how important a school was to a rural community.^{xxi} As one presenter explained:

Taking a school out of a small community is like taking the heart right out of it. If you have no school, you have no children, no town. Government must realize that in rural Newfoundland, the school is a central institution, and as such, should be developed to impact our communities in a positive way towards the future of Newfoundland. The operation of a school provides a focal point for the community, a source of pride

The anguish that is felt and the outrage that is expressed by rural citizens at the possible loss of their community schools has little to do with nostalgia or sentimentality, as some would prefer to believe. Presenters made clear that their concerns were grounded in a number of very significant social and economic realities. In a rural community a school is not just a place of instruction, meaningful only to the students and their parents. In small rural communities schools continue to function as social and cultural centres for the whole community. School concerts at Christmas time and on other occasions, are eagerly anticipated and attended. This may seem like a small matter in the larger scheme of things, but in a small community it matters a great deal to everyone.^{xxii}

Communities, the Minister was told, take pride in their schools; many were built by volunteer labour. In rural Newfoundland and Labrador the whole community supports and assists the school in myriad ways. The school helps define the community and give it an identity. It is a connection to the past and represents a hope for the future. Most importantly a school is a sign of the community's viability as a place to live, a place to stay, and a place to move to. The presence of children and the sounds of their play throughout the day are signs of life and vitality sorely needed by our rural communities. When community leaders claim that the loss of the school will lead to the death of the community they know what they are talking about. If they have a choice, families with school age children will not move to a community that doesn't have a school.

For rural presenters the issue was simple: We can choose to sustain and develop rural education and rural communities by building on the intrinsic strengths and advantages of small scale, community based schooling or we can choose not to. The choice we make reflects our commitment to rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Many community leaders expressed the view that the current attack on small community schools is just another

aspect of the general erosion of services reflecting the government's attempt to force another round of resettlement.^{xxiii}

Presenters claimed that rural communities make many valuable contributions to their schools. Because the school is a source of pride to the community, and there is a vested interest in its success and upkeep. There is a sense of ownership and responsibility on the part of the whole community, not just those with children in school. Consequently, many communities support their schools in concrete ways in terms of upkeep and repairs and material resources.

In addition, the people of the community are often used as resource persons for special projects and school activities. This moral and financial support from the community is a significant factor in the success of rural schooling. If the school is removed from the community, the school will lose this support to a significant degree. This will be to the school and the students' detriment. Parents do not and will not support a school located in another community to the same degree or in the same way even though their children attend that school.

Having the school in the community greatly facilitates contact and interaction between parents and teachers, in both formal and informal ways. Contact is easier, and often occurs in the daily routine of community life. When the school is not in the community and parents have to travel some distance this contact is diminished. Given the demonstrated importance of this kind of interaction to student achievement, closing a community school is not a good idea.

A principal speaking on behalf of her small community school spoke to this issue:

St. George's Primary School is a proud school, which enjoys the support of the community. We may not have all the resources, programs or teachers, as larger centres have, but we do have teacher-pupil contact because we are small and we are a community school. Education is built on a community of human beings. It seems like a simple concept but I think we've forgotten it along the way.

Several parents pointed to the apparent contradiction in government's policies. On the one hand they were advocating a more active role for parents in the school through the creation of schools councils. On the other hand, they seemed determined to make parental participation, at least in rural areas, more difficult.

Pre-school literacy and orientation programs were used as examples by a number of presenters to make the case for community based education. These early intervention programs have been developed to combat the traditional problems with literacy. The most successful programs, in terms of attendance, it was claimed were those that operated in a single community. It was further claimed that those schools serving a number of communities found that the further away a family lived from the school the less likely they were to participate in the program. One reason for this was that not all parents in rural areas have access to two cars. So, if one parent is working away from the

community the other cannot attend. Rural parents do not have bussing and taxi options as do urban parents.^{xxiv}

Small Schools Are Viable And Valuable

The “official view” of small schools was primarily a re-play of the traditional “conventional wisdom”(Sher, 19977) regarding solving the “rural school problem” Nachtigal (1982): small schools are neither academically nor economically viable. They weren’t academically viable because they could not deliver quality programs; they were not economically viable because the per pupil operating costs were much higher than in larger schools. In the interest of improving educational opportunities, not to mention cutting costs, rural education reform dictated but one course of action: closure and consolidation.

The grass roots perspective on the viability of small schools was fundamentally different from this official view. First of all they questioned the notion that small schools cannot be viable. Their position was that not only can they be viable but they are in fact quite valuable, especially so for particular student populations. Many people seized on the government’s suggestion that small schools cannot provide a quality education program. They noted that “quality” is a very relative term and can mean different things to different people. Individual communities pointed with pride to the achievements of their small community schools to demonstrate that small schools can be quality schools. Examples were offered of small schools in the province whose academic achievement record, degree of retention and post secondary participation demonstrated their worth. They equaled or surpassed provincial standards. These were offered as proof that small schools are capable of quality education.

The government’s claim that small schools were not economically viable was also questioned and criticised. People were very critical of the government’s notion that closing small schools would save significant amounts of money. They pointed to the increased costs of bussing and the costs of repairs and renovations for the receiving schools. There were suggestions that the economic viability of a school be determined on an individual basis and be carried out by an independent assessor.^{xxv} There was also strong criticism of the government’s emphasis on economic viability. As one presenter protested,

Schools are not corporations, they are built on people, values, and morals. When looking at schools in terms of closures or reductions, don’t look at them in terms of dollars and cents, because I’m still waiting to see a document that says school closures will save money,

The case was also made for the intrinsic value of small-scale schooling^{xxvi}. Small schools were not just viable but were in fact very valuable in terms of their capability in providing a certain kind of education. The smaller number of students in the school and the generally smaller pupil teacher ratio was a very positive thing. Small schools have or

represent a particular set of educational values that should be cherished and built upon. Small schools, because of their size, create a unique, nurturing, and supportive learning environment that enhances children's learning. Small schools provide an opportunity for child and student centred education and schooling. Small classes and smaller overall student population allows teachers to get to know the students and their parents in a way that does not happen in larger schools. It is rather ironic, noted several presenters, that at a time when in other parts of North America, people are starting to realize that small schools, not big schools are to be preferred, we seem determined in this province to close as many of our small schools as we can.

The emergent research which indicates that for socio-economically "at risk" students smaller schools offered them their best chance of academic success was also cited as a reason for keeping small schools. Small schools are particularly valuable in rural areas where a significant number of "at risk" students. A number of presenters made reference to the emergent body of research that indicates that small schools represent the best chance that "at risk" students have.^{xxvii}

In addition to rejecting the notion that small schools are not viable and asserting the notion that small schools are in fact to be valued and preserved for their own sake, rural participants maintained that the question of school viability cannot be addressed without reference to community schooling. If we are committed to sustaining and developing rural Newfoundland and if we subscribe to community based schooling, then we have to accept the fact that this will mean the necessary existence of small schools. But the necessity of their existence isn't because they are so remote and isolated they cannot be closed. They are necessary because in rural areas of the province small scale schooling makes the most sense. Larger schools might make economic sense in urban areas with high levels of population concentration; but in rural areas with a dispersed and distant population, particularly in areas with large numbers of "at risk" students small schools are required.

From this perspective questions about the viability of a particular school are asked and answered very differently. If a small community school is determined to be non-viable because it lacks the capability of providing quality education, the response should not be to close it but to provide it with whatever resources it needs to become viable. Reform efforts should set out to **make** small schools viable; not to close them. We make them viable because we value them as necessary for the education of rural children and the future of rural communities. By taking this tack, rural citizens turned the government's argument on its head: the government wanted to target for closure any school classified as non-viable; the people suggested that non-viable schools be targeted for extra funding and provision.

Distance Education

Distance education and other forms of information technology were suggested as ways of making small community schools viable by making up for any real or alleged programming deficiencies. As far as participants were concern, "The distance education

program currently operating in a number of small schools has been a good example of how we can use technology to help schools offer a broader spectrum of courses. This type of program should be expanded." Other participants pointed out that the information technologies that now exist make the size and location of a school irrelevant to its program capability. Many people found it curious that there was no mention of distance education in the government's *Consultation Paper*. Some took this absence as an indication of a lack of interest in sustaining community schools.^{xxviii}

Student Transportation

As noted above the government's *Consultation Paper* contained two general proposals regarding student transportation: 1. More students will have to be bussed longer distances in the name of improved educational opportunities; 2. Existing bussing services for some students will be reduced in order to cut costs.

The "grass roots" perspective on student transportation was once again very different from government's. The primary concerns of rural parents and educators focused on issues to do with safety and the negative impact of the current degree of bussing on children and their families. Their basic position was that too many students were now being bussed too far, and often on dangerous roads. They rejected the notion that increased bussing was necessarily the only, or the appropriate way to improve educational opportunities for their children. They were critical of the proposed cuts to bussing services describing these as government's way of trying to save money by imposing hardships on rural children and their parents.

The issues and concerns raised by parents related to government's plans to increase bussing included:

- A number of safety concerns were raised, including the lack of adult supervision on school buses and the need for seat belts and two-way radios. Many parents were concerned by the reduction in road maintenance and snow clearing they were noticing. The Department of Education should work closely with the Department of Works, Services and Transportation to ensure that bus routes are cleared of snow in the winter and that these routes are assigned priority for maintenance. Several presenters related examples of bus routes not being cleared in time for buses to reach schools before morning classes begin.
- In several areas of the province, over the last several years, school boards had promised to provide lunchtime bussing in order to get people to agree to close their community schools. This offer was made in the face of parental opposition based in part on the fact that the receiving school did not have proper lunch room facilities. Recent cuts in bussing provision had forced boards to renege on lunchtime bussing. Several parents expressed their concerns about the safety and health of children eating at their desks. Many people felt that lunchrooms should be provided or lunch hour bussing be continued or re-established.

- There was concern expressed about younger children being so far from home. If they became ill, it might be difficult for parents to go and get them. Parents of children with special needs were especially concerned about the possibility of their children been bussed to distant communities. Several parents expressed the concern that mixed busloads of older and younger students had a negative impact on younger children. Older students often exposed younger children to ideas and language that their parents did not feel they were ready for.
- Bussed children do not have the option to linger after school to chat with a teacher or play with a friend. They do not have the opportunity to seek help from their teacher with something they are having difficulty with in one of their classes. Bussing negatively affects the quality of a child's life and the nature of his/her participation in the school. Because they are bussed, they may not be able to take part in the extra-curricular life of their new school. Sports teams, clubs and organizations, drama groups, and school choirs provide valuable educational experiences for our children. It is little wonder they lack a sense of belonging and ownership for the school.
- It was felt that longer bus rides would have a negative affect on student learning and, therefore, guidelines should be developed with the goal of keeping bus rides as short as possible. Many presenters noted that bussed students had reduced access to teachers and the fatigue factor from longer rides often inhibits their learning.^{xxix}

Rural citizens were generally critically of all government's proposed changes to the student transportation system. They saw them all for the most part as being primarily concerned with saving money for government at the cost of imposing hardship on students and their parents. With specific reference to proposals put forward by government in their *Consultation Paper*, rural citizens proposed:

- In general we should work towards reducing bussing not increasing it.
- Late busses should be available to all students who are forced to attend consolidated schools outside their home communities, so as to enable them to fully participate in the academic and co-curricular programs of the school.
- Staggered openings, according to some presenters, wreak havoc on the lives of families with more than one school age child. Parents, for example, with children in different levels (i.e., primary, elementary and high school) could have children starting school, leaving school and having lunches at different times
- User fees for busses were rejected by rural participants. The government had closed community schools and created the need for school bussing. Therefore they should pay for it.

- Rural parents pointed out that it is inappropriate to have a single set of guidelines or regulations for the province. Road and weather conditions have to be taken into consideration when considering student bussing.^{xxx}
- Parents were very critical of government's earlier proposals for bussing times which would have seen primary children spending 90 minutes a day on the bus and high school students 2 hours.
- Maximum bussing distances/times should vary depending on the age/grade level of the students. While opinions varied, most presenters suggested a 45-60 minute maximum duration for a bus run carrying high school students. Younger elementary children should be bussed for no more than 30 minutes and Kindergarten/primary students should be bussed for a maximum of 15 minutes.
- Several presenters suggested that the length of the overall school day be considered when examining maximum travel times. They suggested that waiting periods due to staggered openings and closings, be factored into the total school day.
- Local school boards should have the power and flexibility to set maximum bussing times so that conditions and circumstances can be taken in to consideration.

Finally, several participants linked their concerns about bussing directly to their argument for maintaining small community schools. The more community schools we have and maintain the less need there is to bus children. Community schools enable children, especially younger children, to be educated close to home and not have to endure long, tiresome and sometimes dangerous bus rides. Spend money on resources for community schools not busses to take children away from the community.

School Designation

For rural residents school designation was generally a secondary issue to the primary one of maintaining their small community school and keeping bussing times and distances as short as possible. Quite a few communities had in previous years demonstrated their willingness to give up their individual small denominational school in favor of a single inter-denominational or "joint services" school which would serve the educational needs of all children in the community. It was clear from the consultation meetings that as long as the community could keep its school and/or keep bussing times and distances at a minimum for their younger children, the majority of rural residents would accept the re-designation of their denominational schools. They would accept an inter-denominational school for the community to which all children could go.

Some Pentacostal and Roman Catholic parents in selected areas^{xxxii} of the province, however, were very concerned about the school designation issue. Nevertheless, there was no consensus evident from the consultation meetings as to how to decide on school designation. A wide variety of opinions were expressed on issues such as who in a community or an area should be allowed to have a say, what the process should be like,

what percentage of persons expressing a view would be needed to have a school designated as uni-denominational.

Conclusion

The public consultation process in Newfoundland and Labrador clearly revealed a wide chasm between the official and the grass roots views as to how to improve education and schooling in rural communities.

The official view insisted that the progress of rural educational reform dictated the closure and consolidation of small community schools. Such a structural change was needed, the government claimed, in order to improve educational opportunities for rural children. Small schools cannot provide the kinds of quality programming that rural children and students need to "take their place on the world stage" and "successfully compete in the 21st century." Parents should accept the need for more and longer bussing as a small price to pay for a higher quality of education for their children. A restructured system would also be a more efficient system enabling the government to realize substantial savings from closures and reductions to some bussing services. To some extent this position, claimed the government, was a necessary response to the tough "economic realities of the nineties;" however, the primary goal, insisted the *Consultation Paper*, is to improve the quality of education.

The "grass roots" insisted that the foundation of rural educational reform should be a commitment to sustaining and strengthening community-based education. Rural citizens suggested that an ecological perspective needs to inform any proposed changes or intended improvements. The focus cannot be just on the school or the children. The interdependent, mutually beneficial, and reciprocal relationship that exists between a rural communities and their schools must be considered. The closure of a school has social, economic and cultural implications for the community and all its residents. A community school provides a connection to the past, a sense of continuity, and a sign of community vitality and viability.

Community schools facilitate the important relationships and interactions between parents and teachers. Community schools enable children to be educated close to home, thus avoiding long, tiresome, and sometimes dangerous bus rides. Students develop a connection with the school and a sense of ownership; they have a greater opportunity to fully participate in the academic and co-curricular life of the school.

The grass roots view insisted that small schools are not only viable but also valuable as places of quality education. The official view as to what constitutes "quality education" was questioned and criticised; examples of high quality small schools were offered to make the point. Rural citizens rejected the government's notion that significant economic savings may be realized from closing and consolidating small schools. Such savings, such as they are, have to be measured against the impact of such closures on children, families and communities.

From a rural perspective, if some small community schools are found to be lacking in resources, the appropriate response in the name of improvement is to provide them with the needed resources to make them academically viable, not to close them. Distance education and emerging information technologies were viewed as potential ways of maintaining and increasing viability of small community schools.

Finally, the grass roots perspective questioned government's motivation and ultimate agenda. Rural citizens felt that the proposed changes by government had two goals. The first was to cut spending on education regardless of the effects on the quality of education or the quality of students' lives. The second was to reduce the provision of services such as education to rural areas as a way of forcing people to abandon their small rural communities and move to larger "growth centres."

Endnotes

ⁱ In January 1996, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador committed to consulting the public on educational reform. This promise was communicated through the Liberal Party's election "Red Book" entitled *Ready for a Better Tomorrow: Platform of the Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador*. This document stated that "The new Liberal government is committed to dialogue and discussion on all elements of implementing education reform before decisions are made," and went on to say that "There will be extensive public consultation before any new school viability rules are adopted."

ⁱⁱ In addition to circulating this document through community newspapers and the post, the government made it available on the internet. It may be viewed at: <http://www.gov.nf.ca/publicat/educate/educate.htm>

For the sake of brevity I shall shorten the title of this document in the rest of my paper to the *Consultation Paper*.
ⁱⁱⁱ *Structuring the Education System: A Public Consultation Paper for Educational Change in Newfoundland and Labrador* (1996) [Government Document].

^{iv} Ibid.

^v The original schedule called for 16 meetings but 3 extra ones were added because of demand. The public sessions were generally conducted in a fairly informal manner with plenty of opportunity for questions and comments. The Minister of Education has to be given credit for taking the time to tour the province in this way and being willing to stay and listen until everyone who wished to had had his/her say.

^{vi} The current round of educational reform in Newfoundland and Labrador began in 1991 with the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry.

^{vii} *Our Children Our Future* (1992) was the official published report of the government's Royal Commission of Inquiry.

^{viii} *Our Children Our Future* (1992) Recommendation 8 (p.229)

^{ix} In December of 1995, the government released a draft version of a new schools act, *Schools Act, 1996*.

Included in this act were these "school viability regulations."

^x The rural protest against these viability regulations was greatly assisted by the coincidence of a provincial election. School closures became a critical election issue and when the incumbent Liberal government realized that these viability regulations could cost them many rural seats, they quickly rescinded them and promised the consultation process which is the subject of this paper.

^{xi} *Structuring the Education System: A Public Consultation Paper for Educational Change in Newfoundland and Labrador* (1996) [Government Document]

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid

^{xiv} "... communities or areas" There is a considerable difference, unacknowledged or not understood by the author(s) of this *Consultation Paper*, between closing one of two or more schools in a community and closing one of two or more schools in an area. Most rural communities would accept the former suggestion since it would leave the community still with a school. The later suggestion, however, is much more problematic since at the very least it means leaving at least one community with no school. Also depending on what is to constitute an "area" there are important implications regarding bussing.

^{xv} *Structuring the Education System: A Public Consultation Paper for Educational Change in Newfoundland and Labrador* (1996) [Government Document]

^{xvi} Does this mean they are not prepared to provide a "quality program" for these isolated schools?

^{xvii} The issues surrounding the designation of schools are very complex and making sense of them is beyond the scope of this paper and the interest of its author. I am providing only the briefest overview here because the designation of schools was part of the consultation process. As I indicate elsewhere in my paper, this issue was not of primary importance for the majority of rural residents.

^{xviii} In this section I am presenting a synthesis of the views and arguments presented at the 19 public consultation meetings that were held around the province. In developing this section I have drawn on a number of sources: a number of individuals and groups have made available copies of their formal presentations; community newspapers reported on each of the public sessions and these were supplemented in a number of cases with editorials and "letters to the editor;" I have also drawn on the extensive network of rural educators from around the province whom I know and who attended the public sessions; I have also made use of the government's own post process publication on the proceedings; finally, my research assistant and I attended several of the public sessions. I cannot claim that this section reports on everything that was said; for the sake of brevity I have had to be selective. However, I can claim that this section is an accurate representation of the views of rural parents and educators regarding the most important issues.

For the sake of continuity I will use the same headings in this section that I use in the earlier section, *The Official View*

^{xix} The first public meeting took place less than a week after the consultation process was announced. People at the first meeting did not in fact see the *Consultation Paper* until the meeting where it was distributed just before the meeting began.

^{xx} The activities of a parents group, as reported in a local paper, from the Baie Verte community of Ricketts to save their school illustrates the point. Parents wrote letters to government and put together an information package that pointed out research showing the benefits of keeping small, community schools open. "We don't think it will save any money," Karen Blake, head of the parent-teacher's association was quoted as saying. "It costs \$12,700 annually for the schools heat, light, water and sewer bills," Blake said, "but it will cost \$35,500 to add another bus. The school has only four and a half teaching units," she added, "which would likely have to be added to a Baie Verte school if the students moved there." The parents had also done some investigation of multigrading, which traditionally has been used as weapon to convince rural communities to close their small schools. "We couldn't find any convincing evidence that sharing grades is a bad thing," she said. "We know from our personal experience that it can be good." Feb. 18, 1996 E.T.)

^{xxi} Perhaps the best expression of this view came from Maurice Tarrant of Lawn, a small rural town on the Burin Peninsula. In the school wars of January and February, 1996, he wrote:

In rural areas our schools are the very heart of our community. What happens if the provincial government rips that heart out? As with any living entity, it will most assuredly die. Those who think that this is simply an education issue should consider what will happen if families decide to start moving out of a community to be closer to a school that their children attend.

Houses will be left vacant. Who will rent when the trend is to move from the community? Property values will drop. Businesses will most definitely feel the negative impact as whole families move away... We are systematically being forced out of our communities to satisfy a government agenda to resettle rural Newfoundland.

Our very way of life and culture is now being threatened like no other period in our history. If we neglect to make our voices heard, our silence will spell certain death for our communities. It's time that our government saw the human face of our people, not just the statistical value.

^{xxii} It has always been difficult for some to understand and respect what the loss of its school means to a rural community. Rarely will an educational authority legitimate this issue as being relevant to the discussion about a school closure. This uniquely rural perspective is either ignored, dismissed as irrelevant or mere sentimentality, or treated with contempt by our educational leaders. This lack of understanding is most clearly seen when the community as a whole is not permitted to take part in school closure meetings or to vote on the fate of their school. In many situations only those parents with children in school get to participate. The assumption being that other members of the community have nothing at stake and therefore have no right to express their views in

the closure discussions. Forgotten is the notion that it takes a whole community to educate a child. Ignored is the fact that everyone in a rural community experiences a sense of loss when a school is closed

^{xxiii} In the 1960's the government of the day coerced many small rural communities to "re-settle" in designated growth centres. There is a wide spread view in the province, among rural people, that the government would like to see the same thing happen again, but lacks the temerity to say so overtly. Instead, there has been gradual erosion in the services provided to rural communities such as: highway maintenance, ferry services, postal services, and policing.

^{xxiv} Although not appreciated by many urban based educators, many rural families have no car at all.

^{xxv} Charisma Collegiate Principal George Chaulk, speaking on behalf of the local school committee pointed out to the minister that the operation of schools should be based on more than a balance sheet. "Efficiency is fine if you're talking about TV's or stereos," he said. "In this case of viability, there should be some sort of external assessment to give a facility a chance to prove its worth." The Nor'Wester (Springdale), Wed., Oct. 2, 1996.

^{xxvi} Many presenters criticised the general belief of the government that bigger was necessarily better: Sheldon Kirby of Norris Arm told the Minister: "Bigger is not always better, Mr. Minister, sometimes it's just bigger." (The Lewisport Pilot : Sept. 25, 1996).

^{xxvii} This was one of the issues I spoke to when I made a presentation to the Minister of Education, at the public meeting held in Mt. Pearl on December 15, 1996.

^{xxviii} Current government policy is that funding for distance education will only be provided for small schools that are "necessarily existent": schools on islands, with no road connection to another community; and those existing too far from another school to make bussing feasible.

^{xxix} Given the numbers of rural children everywhere in North America who ride the bus to school, many for up to two hours, it is astonishing how little research has been done to investigate the relationship between time and distance and academic achievement.

^{xxx} Time and again during this consultation process the wide chasm between the official and the grass roots perspective was demonstrated. The official view seemed always to be grounded in either an ignorance or indifference to the complex reality of the issues. The government wanted simple straightforward answers to what rural folks kept indicating were complex questions. The diversity of rural contexts was seemingly lost on government officials. The government has always wanted to set a single set of regulations for bussing, ignoring totally local conditions. Rural people have always insisted that local conditions have to be considered. A 30 km ride on a straight stretch of paved highway in a built up area is not the same as a 30 km ride on a winding narrow dirt mountain road.

^{xxxi} To some degree this issue reflected a number of divisions within the province. For example school designation generated considerable heat and interest in the capital city of St. John's. This reflected a urban/rural split on this issue. With a few notable exceptions rural areas were less interested in the denominational issues. They had "bigger fish to fry." There were also many suggestions that this was an issue more important to church leaders and officials, situated in St. John's than it was to ordinary parents and educators.



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